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THE NEXT C.G.N. REPORT

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When I first saw the *Report of the Committee on Grammatical Nomenclature* (in 1914) and discovered that gerunds were to be distinguished from infinitives, I sighed; for I had been used to classifying by function, and I wanted one name for that one substantive use of a verbal. But I gave up my preference. "If," said I, "the C.G.N. recommends gerunds, I am going to learn to teach them." Doubtless that little episode is typical of what ten thousand of us did with thirty or forty thousand of our personal crotchets. We believed in uniformity, believed in the Committee, wished to be loyal to it, and gladly made our sacrifices. Today we realize even more than then how huge and vexatious was the task, how conscientiously it was performed, and how desirable is allegiance to it.

But every year shows more clearly that allegiance has become merely a matter of principle: we feel the duty, but we must doubt the benefit. In six years our Constitution of Grammar has come to seem almost medieval. The work of the C.G.N. had the ill fortune to be prepared as a foundation for old conditions and will not support the new building that we suddenly find ourselves obliged to design. (1) It was laid to support the heavy weight of Greek, Latin, and German—which have almost ceased to have any weight in the high schools. (2) It was laid according to the architecture of all-embracing scholarship; and now we are building

according to the plans of simple mother-tongue needs. (3) Only two teachers of English were on the Committee, and one of these had small experience of the secondary classroom. (4) There was little recognition of the fact that nomenclature must often be determined by such classroom demands as sequence of topics and preliminary definition. (5) The Committee had in mind the teaching of formal grammar; recent textbooks show a demand for informality and a tendency to display structure for simple rhetorical purposes. (6) An essay could be written to show what a gulf has been opened between former grammatical needs and the needs of 1920.

As a teacher, standing on this side of the gulf, I wish to testify as concisely as possible about the ways in which the old *Report* proves wrong for classroom practice, to furnish evidence of the radical changes that will be necessary when some new committee undertakes revision. I shall omit the many points raised by Professor Wannamaker in the *Journal* for February, 1915; but I should like to repeat his sentiments and to adopt them for this article: "Earnest thanks are due to the Committee. . . . I am limited to the unpleasant task of adverse comment."

1. A classification of case-forms is a needless perplexity for English. "Common case-form" is really a name for "a grammatical phenomenon which does not exist in English." It is as bewildering to children as it is perfectly logical to grammarians. Case in English grammar is a matter of use; in one of the uses there is a change of form.

2. On page 2 "possessive," "reciprocal," etc., appear as classifications co-ordinate with "personal," "relative," etc. So for the adjectives on page 3.

3. Do teachers find it worth while to subdivide intransitive verbs into complete and linking? I have never seen the value. What does "impersonal" mean in reference to the person of an English verb? (Page 4.)

4. On page 4 we are told that an infinitive is a substantive; on page 35 we see it displayed as two kinds of modifier. Was the committee careless? See paragraph 22 below.

5. On page 4 the distinction proposed between a gerund and a noun is unteachable. I do not mean that it is extremely diffi-

cult; it is absolutely unteachable, even to a class of linguists. Any class can decide whether an *ing* word has some verbal force remaining in it; no teacher can determine the point at which "verbal force no longer predominates." No mind can set up any measurement that will fit any other mind's measure of "predominant." Does 51 per cent predominate? or 60 per cent? or 75 per cent? This is no attempt at humor. I have recently seen two friendly teachers in an argument about "a *rustling* in the bushes caused by a deer"; to one this was decidedly verbal; to the other it was hardly verbal at all.

6. On page 5 is the most curious feature of the *Report*: no classification of adverbs. This lack seems to me as logical as it is practical, for our old friends "time," "manner," and "degree" are not grammatical distinctions. At this point the Committee advised us against non-grammatical classification. Yet elsewhere in the *Report* there is a plethora of non-grammatical distinctions—e.g.: the moods on page 10, pronouns on 2 and 15, adjectival clauses 24-26, and "mood-ideas" 30-34. In two other passages (pages 13 and 36), and in footnotes on 5, 8, and 12, this kind of wisdom is tendered. The conscientious follower of the *Report* must infer, therefore, that "identifying adjectives," "adherent" modifying, and "assumptive clause" are important.

7. On pages 5 and 20 we are told that the infinitive is "usually" substantive. Of course, as Professor Wannamaker has said, this is untrue. Anyone can prove to his own satisfaction in half an hour that the modifying uses are quite as numerous as the substantive uses.

8. The practical wisdom of page 13 declares that "many words are indeterminate when standing alone," illustrating with *enough*, which is not any part of speech until it is in a sentence. This most vital truth for grammar-teaching is vitiated on page 7 by saying that "a word commonly classed as one part of speech is *sometimes* used with the force of another"; on page 19 by speaking of "adverbs used to introduce subordinate clauses"; and on page 20 by expatiating upon "adjective and adverbs used substantively."

9. The parts of speech are listed on page 1; on page 7 another part of speech is defined—"expletive."

10. Are "phrasal participle" (page 5) and "verb-phrase" (page 10) consistent?

11. Although not a line was given to uses of the adverb, six lines were given (page 12) to uses of the adverbial infinitive.

12. Though not a line was used for discussing meanings of adverbs, the meaning of *stone's throw* was declared (page 14) to make the term *possessive* "clearly wrong." The clearness of this wrong is not apparent unless we start with the definition that "*possessive* denotes ownership." Most of us never enter upon such subtleties of mere meaning, but get along very well with the *Century* definition: "expresses possession and other derived relations."

13. This same deference to subtleties of meaning was shown by saying (page 14) that "*indirect object* will hardly serve for *father* in 'Spare your father such a grief.'" Yet Whitney and Kittredge (fairly sensitive judges) call this an indirect object. Neither of these great grammarians felt the need of "secondary object" to explain "taught me French." Indeed we can hardly believe our senses when we find the *Report* recommending three different analyses and names for the mere thought-contents of "give me money," "spare me grief," and "teach me French."

14. We are told on page 15 that "words like *my* and *your* present a peculiar difficulty." There is no difficulty that I could ever discover in teaching thirteen-year-old boys. Just as they easily learn that *some* is an adjective in "*some* money" and a pronoun in "give me *some*," so they could readily distinguish between "*his* money" and "give me *his*." But the Committee created a very real difficulty, an insuperable one, when it required that *his* should sometimes be called an adjective, while *John's* should always be called a noun—with a different name! Mere human teachers have to help pupils by simple and invariable analogies; they must teach pronouns as "noun-like words"; and since there is no functional difference between "*his* hat" and "*John's* hat," they dare not perplex young minds and violate their own canon law by insisting that there is a difference. One solution sure to be presented to any new committee will be, "Call them both adjectives, since both qualify nouns." That sounds right. But then the bright pupil will come upon "little *John's* hat" and will

insist that *little* is an adverb because it modifies the adjective *John's*. The fact is that at a few points our canon of classifying by function fails us (e.g., adverbial nouns may not be called adverbs, because they are modified by adjectives). The possessive of *John* is not an adjective; therefore the possessive of *he* must not be called an adjective if we seek for simplicity and consistency. I have heard of a publisher who put the C.G.N. inconsistency into a book and thereby roused a storm of protest from practical teachers. I also know that three French teachers have urged me to teach that *my* is an adjective, because they wanted me to establish a parallel where no parallelism exists.

15. A striking illustration of how antique the *Report* already is may be seen on page 16: "When the words are called possessive adjectives, the mistake of writing *his* or *its* with an apostrophe will be less likely to be made." In the first place, though I have seen *it's* thousands of times, I have never seen *hi's*. In the second place, the whole burden of the Economy Committee's grammar report in the *Journal* for March, 1919, and of Professor Wilcox's article in the same number, is that such theoretical knowledge has no perceptible effect in eradicating bad habits of spelling.

16. On page 16 *mine* is called a possessive adjective, but in modern English it never is an adjective.

17. What percentage of teachers or text-makers have used "relative" and "absolute" superlative? (Page 16.)

18. The ancient and foreign influences in the *Report* stand out on page 17: "Many verbs are capable of being used with either transitive or complete force." The fact in English is that almost all verbs may be used in both ways. And apparently any verb is "capable" of being used in both ways, if we may trust to *Endymion*, where we find the following used with direct objects: *stare*, *peep*, *bubble*, *cower*, *snort*, *droop*, *twinkle*. In the *Century's* quotations are to be seen two cases of *seem* without any predicate nominative.

19. The gerund is said (page 18) to be "quite different" from the infinitive. If this "quite" means "entirely," then I must quit teaching grammar, for I can hardly see any functional distinction. If "quite" means "somewhat," the difference is too

small for me to impart to pupils—except as a mere matter of form. How remote 1913 is from 1920 we see in this division of verbal noun-functions: the Economy Committee's grammar report questioned the advisability of distinguishing *even between noun and adjective functions*.

20. A page and a half is devoted to a most intricate discussion of "determinative" adjective clauses, but only two lines are given (page 25) to adverb clauses. Why the mysterious brevity with one subject (which is vastly more in need of comment) and the mysterious prolixity with the other? Were adverbs taboo in the Committee's discussions? There was real need for one verdict. Is the following italicized clause adverbial or substantive: "We are glad *that you did*"?

21. We are told on page 29 that *king* is a predicate in "It is the *king*." This may be true. But if so, how are we to determine whether *it* is used "with purely introductory force" or with such adulterated force that it may be called a real subject? No authority has ever told us.

22. The most ambiguous section is "uses of the infinitive" on page 35; for here we see a full exhibit of the adjectival and adverbial uses of a part of speech that is substantive on page 4. There are five possible explanations. (1) The Committee thought of these modifying uses as exceptional, like adverbial nouns. If so, then infinitives are still substantive, just as adverbial nouns are nouns. But no text-makers have understood page 35 in that way; they have interpreted it to mean, "An infinitive is an undefined verbal that is used like a noun, an adjective, an adverb, and a verb." It is incredible that the Committee could have designed to make a definition of an infinitive impossible. (2) The Committee could come to no agreement, and so decided to leave pages 4 and 35 contradictory. This is fanciful. (3) The Committee ignorantly supposed that modifying uses were negligible for the brief synopsis on page 4. This is barely possible, but is entirely out of keeping with the meticulous completeness of all the rest of that page. (4) The Committee merely forgot to supply the logical link between pages 4 and 35. This is perfectly possible. (5) The Committee considered that there was no need of a logical link which

could be supplied in every dictionary and every (?) grammar published before 1913. This is almost surely the case, for it would be in keeping with the whole design of presenting lists of terms without preliminary definition. The next report must supply the link. It is furnished in a well-known scholarly text published while the Committee was deliberating; the treatment of infinitives in this book corresponds precisely to the arrangement in the *Report*. I refer to Kittredge and Farley's *Advanced Grammar*. On page 132 the infinitive is defined as "a verb-form that has some of the properties of a noun"; pages 132-36 discuss these noun uses; pages 136-37 discuss "the infinitive as a modifier." To the casual observer these two aspects are presented without logical connection, but the link is furnished in fine print on page 136: "This use [as modifier] is due to the fact that the infinitive with *to* is really a prepositional phrase." This is obvious enough; it is a commonplace of grammar; it is the explanation to be found in Mätzner, Whitney, Sweet, Jespersen, and a dozen lesser grammars; it is in every dictionary (see the *International* under *to*); no dictionary speaks of infinitives as anything but verbal nouns; scholars like Earle, Greenough and Kittredge, R. G. White, and Lounsbury speak of infinitives only as nouns. Yet the *Report* seems to say that the Committee tried to overturn a definition so universally accepted.

23. On page 36 teachers are warned against "insistent analysis" of the infinitive. The warning is interpreted thus: "It is advised that, in elementary teaching, the first step be to determine whether a given example is substantive, adjectival, adverbial, or predicative; and that no second step be taken, unless it be," etc. How far removed this is from present ways of thinking may be measured by comparing it with a footnote of the grammar report of March, 1919: "One member has proposed as a further essential: verbals distinguished as noun and adjective." The Economy Committee is doubtful about even that first big step that is taken before we arrive at that second big step that is taken before we begin to analyze infinitives. (Would an exclamation mark be undignified here?)

24. "Determining whether an infinitive is substantive or predicative" is an operation that sounds to us nowadays like

"determining whether east is east or west." What does "predicative" mean? If it means, as an honest word should, "making a statement," then our infinitive is transformed into a verb, and so vanishes from a lesson in infinitives. If it means "forming a clause," it denies both of the fundamental definitions of *clause* and *infinitive*; it refutes the whole purpose of the modern teaching of verbals; it will drive teachers to explaining an infinitival mystery by reference to a clausal mystery; it will compel textbooks to teach clauses before verbals.

With this ruthless breach of a faith pledged to childhood compare the practical conscientiousness of the latest grammar report: "Through sharp distinction here between verb and verbal, which does not assert, and in no other way, can pupils learn to distinguish consciously the clause from the phrase or other group of words."

Teachers can understand that. It is a statement about the facts of real life, which brings out like a flash of sunlight the pale unreality of the old *Report*. It must startle even an observer who has small experience of ninth-grade work. Yet it is not such glaring revelations that are most convincing to the eye of the mere practical teacher. The great and pervasive unreality is on every page, dull and hard to light up. We see and feel—we teachers—and we hardly know how to analyze. We look through the earlier pages, seeing the important items "accusative-dative," "past future tense," "subject substantive," "neutral conditions less vivid"—and we know, though we may not be able to convey our knowledge, that all is wrong. We shake our heads and say, "They didn't understand. There must be a new report."